



The Wholeness of Creation

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller
The Fourth Sunday of Creation Season ~ October 25, 2020*

Ezekiel 47:6–12

My guide then said, “Note well what you see, mere mortal,” and brought me to the edge of the river, where I sat. I noticed many trees along the bank of the river on both sides. My guide then said, “The water flows into lands to the east and down to the Arabah. It will empty into the sea whose waters are salt and it will be made fresh. Every living creature that wanders upon the face of the earth will be drawn to the river and will find refreshment there. There will be an abundance of fish, for wherever these waters flow and everything they touch will be renewed. Anglers from En-gedi to Eneglaim will stand along the banks casting their nets. The fish will be rich in variety, like the fish of the Great Sea. The swamps and marshes, however, will not be made fresh: they will be left for salt. “Fruit trees of every kind will grow along both banks of the river. Their leaves will never wither and their fruit will never fail. They will produce fresh fruit, for they will be nourished by the waters flowing from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be food, and their leaves will be medicine.”

Psalms 33:3–9, 13–15

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| 3 | Sing to God a new song; *
sound a fanfare with all your skill upon the trumpet. | 9 | let all who dwell in the world stand in awe of you.
For you spoke, and it came to pass; *
you commanded, and it stood fast. |
| 4 | O God, your word is right, *
and all your works are sure. | 13 | You look down from heaven *
and behold all the people in the world. |
| 5 | You love righteousness and justice; *
your loving-kindness fills the whole earth. | 14 | From where you sit enthroned you turn your gaze *
on all who dwell on the earth. |
| 6 | By your word, O God, were the heavens made, *
by the breath of your mouth all the heavenly hosts. | 15 | You fashion all the hearts of them *
and understand all their works. |
| 7 | You gather up the waters of the ocean as in a water-skin *
and store up the depths of the sea. | | |
| 8 | Let all the earth fear you; * | | |

Romans 8:18–23

Indeed, I consider the sufferings of the present to be nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. All creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the children of God. Creation was subjected to transience and futility, not of its own accord, but because of the One who subjected it—in the hope that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to corruption and would come to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit—we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free.

Mark 16:14–15

Finally, the risen Christ appeared to the Eleven themselves while they were at table, and scolded them for their disbelief and their stubbornness, since they had put no faith in those who had seen Jesus after the resurrection. Then Jesus told them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation.

At the beginning of this month, I was fortunate to be able to be on a weekend retreat outside of Gloucester Massachusetts, dedicated to the feast of St. Francis and consideration of an encyclical (a fancy name for “letter”) released by Pope Francis five years ago entitled *Laudato Si*, which translates as Praise Be! It’s pretty hard not to have an overwhelming sense of the beauty of creation while overlooking the ocean and the rocky coastline on crisp, early autumn days. I had never read this document, though I was aware of how significant it was for the head of the Roman Catholic Church to promulgate such a strong statement on the unity of all created things in God and the moral responsibility that Christians have to undergo an ecological conversion in order to reckon with our abuse of creation, and to be committed to change in awareness and action.

Most of the time when we are called to contemplate creation, we might most easily imagine splendid landscapes or seashores, or the beauty of animals in their natural habitats. But this one section of *Laudato Si* stood out for me:

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also discover God in all things.

The mention of a “poor person’s face” in the list of subtle forms and the patterning of the natural world is a reminder that human beings are included in the beauty of creation. And while we may have had the tendency to elevate human beings above nature in the past—in a way which distances and denigrates the non-human aspect of creation—this passage proclaims a unity of all things as part of the fullness of God. But the specific reference to “a poor person’s face” is also a reminder that God’s beauty is to be found even in things which may not, as first glance, seem beautiful. A poor person’s face might be more obviously marked by signs of the suffering endured, including lack of food, shelter and trauma. It is, indeed, very difficult to look directly into the face of poverty. But the sadness we might find in any person’s eyes do not immediately suggest the presence of God, but might enable us to see more deeply how God’s spirit is present.

To embrace the glorify creation means to embrace all of creation, including that which is not objectively beautiful or otherwise felicitous. As Paul says to the Romans, We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit—we to groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. There is a traditional interpretation of the Genesis narrative that the reason Childbirth is painful is because of original sin—along with the fact that one must “till the soil” in order to have food—both of which are referred to as labor. When I was a child, I believed that if it hadn’t been for the fact that Adam and Eve messed up, we would all be living happily ever-after in the garden of Eden, where there would be no pain, death, and plenty of good food! But idealized interpretations like this actually do an incredible disservice to God’s creation as we now have come to perceive it. The emergent cosmos and everything in it expands and contracts. Life is created and extinguished. Tragedy and suffering occur, as do things that are glorious. Creation is subject to transience and futility, yet it is still fully one with God. And though fully with God and God’s original goodness, it is not yet complete.

To attribute everything that is not so nice in creation to sin, or any other “mistake” or misdirection of creation is to exclude so much of creation from belonging to the whole. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung had the insight that nothing could be “complete” unless it also incorporated the shadow—not only things that are unconscious, but also what might be considered as “bad” or even “evil.” But in moving toward wholeness and integration, what is “bad” is integrated with the “good” in order to bring about completion and wholeness. This might also be what Paul described as freedom!

At the end of Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation. This is their mandate for a kind of holy labor. We might also re-state this as Go out and proclaim the goodness and wholeness of all of creation. Go and find God in all things—in the peaceful river and the teeming city. In the face of the poor and the face of the privileged. In the falling leaves and in the destructive power of forest fires. There is no question that we do violence to creation and resist living in harmony with what is given to us. But creation continues to call us—sometimes harshly and jarringly—to be at home in the world and find that world at home with God.